

stole. True, the first great philosophic
 critic, Aristotle,
 still bestrides us. In that prosaic work, his
Poetics; there
 are brilliant things; its gift for asking the
 right questions,
 whatever one may think of some of the
 answers, remains
 very remarkable indeed. But on the whole,
 after years
 spent on it, it seems to me—will this sound
 very shocking?
 —an overrated book. How many of its
 conclusions are
 both true and important? Generalisations
 about art—
 if one may hazard yet one more—are
 certainly entertain-
 ing. They make excellent subjects for after-
 dinner con-
 versation, especially as no two people in a
 room ever
 agree about them. They will not hold
 water, but they
 make amusing paper-boats to launch on a
 stream of talk.
 They lead nowhere, but they provide very
 pretty ex-
 cursions. The trouble comes when people
 insist on taking
 them seriously; of that the history of the
Poetics provides
 only too many examples. Who can resist a
 smile at the
 religious fervour with which scholars since
 the Renaissance
 have found Aristotle always right,
 even when they
 have translated him wrong, and have
 extolled the deep
 wisdom of opinions he never held? Subtle,
 but ponderous,
 like an elephant picking up pins, he remains,
 at all events,
 far more sensible and far less dogmatic
 (with much more
 right to be) than most of his successors on
 the philosophic
 side of criticism.

He has had a progeny like Abraham's—
 great names,

often; and what have they produced? What single canon have all of their efforts established—of any practical value either for creating or for criticising literature—that can command general acceptance today? What laws have these philosophers and scientists of literature discovered comparable with the laws of physics, however shifting and fluid even these may be? The best that can be said for most academic criticism is that, as a rule, it has failed